Brigham Young as a Mendon Craftsman: A Study in Historical Archeology

By J. SHELDON FISHER

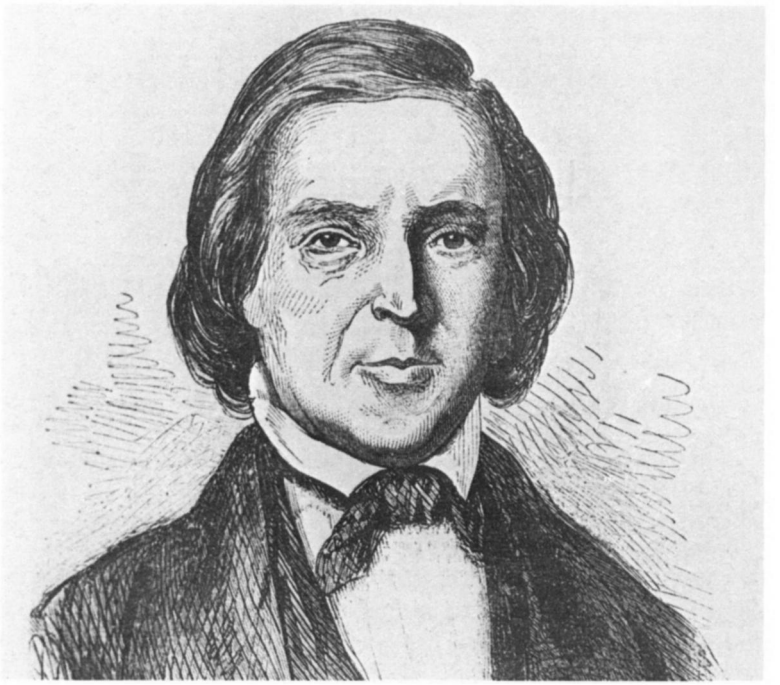
J. Sheldon Fisher, director of the Valentown Museum and former director of the Rochester Historical Society Museum, presents the results of his excavations at the site of Brigham Young's home and shop in Mendon, New York.

LIKE THE OTHER FOUNDERS of the Mormon Church, Brigham Young has been studied as a spiritual leader and as an administrator. That he earned his bread in his early years as a carpenter and in other homely tasks has been mentioned only in passing by his biographers, and his workaday life in Mendon, New York, where he was living when he became interested in Mormonism, has not been studied at all.[1]

One reason for this neglect is lack of historical sources for Young's earlier years. After he joined the Mormon Church in 1832 he began to keep a journal. And from that time to the end of his life, he and his contemporaries left a clear record of his activities. It is not surprising that there are no similar accounts of Brigham's youth and his years as a young carpenter and builder in Mendon. He had not yet distinguished himself from the general population of farmers and artisans who then inhabited western New York.

But, in addition to his own terse references in later writings, sources for Brigham Young's Mendon years do exist. One is literary—a group of documents relating to my own ancestors, the Sheldon family of Mendon, contemporaries of Brigham Young. The other is physical—the artifacts and related evi-

1. S. Dilworth Young, *Young Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City, 1962) deals with Young's youth and young manhood, but it is fictionalized and ends on the eve of his move to Mendon.



Governor Brigham Young of Utah Territory. From Harper's Weekly, *July 11, 1857.*

dence recovered in six summers of archeological excavation at the site of Brigham Young's mill site in Mendon. The archeological effort reveals much about Young's work as a craftsman and provides hints about his way of life in the three or four years before he became a Mormon. While adding to the sum total of our knowledge of Young's early life, this work is another illustration of the use of historical archeology in the study of individuals or groups whose histories cannot be pieced together from letters, diaries, or other documents.

My own interest in Brigham Young, which led me to spend six summers of careful excavation in the mud and water that covered the foundations of his mill and home in Mendon, goes back many years. I had long been intrigued by the lack of knowledge about Young's life in Mendon. And I was

puzzled when I examined the portrait gallery in the historic Ontario County Court House in Canandaigua and found no likeness of Brigham Young among the hundred-plus portraits of distinguished residents of western New York that hang there. Young, after all, was a local resident who distinguished himself after he left the region. He must have been an individual of some interest when he lived here.

Then, one night about ten years ago a man whom I had never seen before knocked on my door and said that he had inherited a satchel full of old documents pertaining to the Sheldon family of Mendon. Since my name was Sheldon and he did not want them, he wondered if I could use them. They turned out to be papers and deeds from Jonas, Daniel, and George Allen and the related Sheldon families. A prize was the Sheldon-Allen family Bible and a fine silhouette of George W. Allen marked "aged 17 1829," who, the papers revealed, had called upon Brigham Young at his Mendon home in that very year. These papers and other documents provided additional bits of information to augment existing knowledge of Young's early years.

Previous studies had already established the basic facts: Brigham Young was born in Wittingham, Vermont, in 1801, the ninth of eleven children born to John and Abigail Howe Young. When Brigham was two, John Young took the family westward into central New York. They settled in Sherburne in Chenango County, then moved to Aurelius in Cayuga County, after that to Tyrone in Ontario County. They also lived in Auburn, Smyrna, and Genoa. Brigham grew to maturity during these years. He was apprenticed to Thomas Jeffries, an Auburn cabinetmaker, and later established himself in Port Byron, New York, as a carpenter, joiner, glazer and painter. In 1824 he married Miriam Works in Aurelius. The young couple moved to Mendon four years later.[2]

The first of the Young family to come to Mendon was father John. On February 23, 1827, he purchased for $112.50 eight acres of land from William Allen, and on April 8, 1830, forty acres from Marvin and Eliza Burton.[3] Brigham's

2. Preston Nibley, *Brigham Young: The Man and His Work* (Independence, Mo., 1936), pp. 1-9; M. R. Werner, *Brigham Young* (New York, 1925), pp. 3-14; Mary Van Sickle Wait, *Brigham Young in Cayuga County* (1964).

3. Book of Deeds, Liber 25, pp. 39, 542, Monroe County Court House, Rochester, N.Y.

brother, Phineas Howe Young, moved to Mendon as a Methodist circuit rider in 1828. Previous to this, he had had great success in establishing a church in the village of Cheshire in the Town of Canandaigua, which he claimed was a real Babylon of sin. His church in Mendon was unsuccessful because of the strong Baptist Church membership.[4]

Brigham Young's move to Mendon was undoubtedly stimulated by reports from family members already there. The date of the move is less certain. In a letter to George Hickox written in 1858, Brigham stated that he had moved to Mendon in 1829. But the passage of thirty years evidently blurred his memory. The general store records of Milton Sheldon, a Mendon merchant and physician, for the years 1828–1832 show that Brigham was buying groceries and supplies in 1828. These records indicate that he was established in his Mendon home by the winter of 1828–1829.[5]

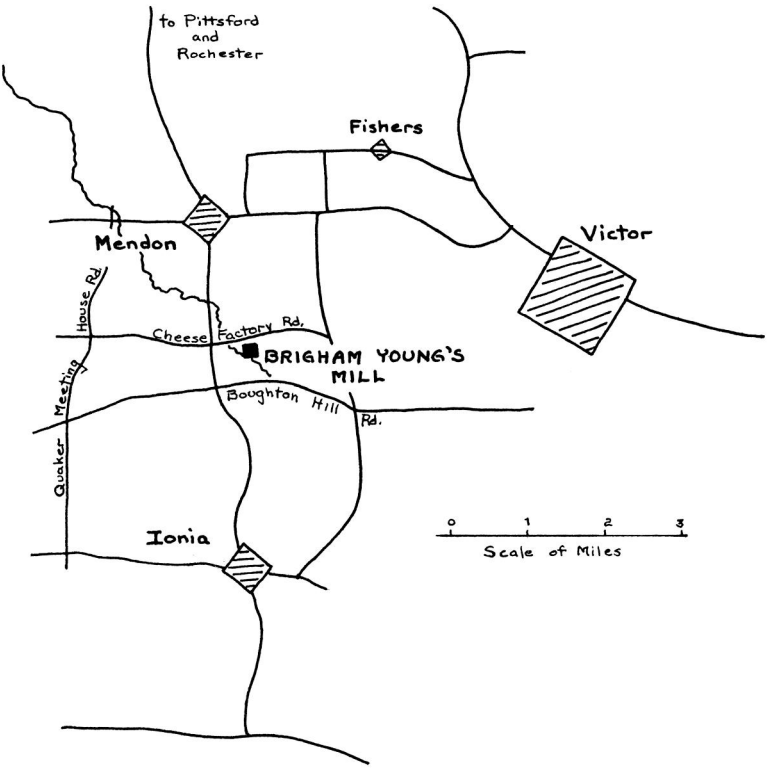
Mendon was twelve miles south of Rochester, twelve miles northwest of Canandaigua, five miles from Victor, four miles from Honeoye Falls, three from Millers' Corners (now Ionia), and two from Fishers—in an area beginning to show great commercial and agricultural prosperity with the opening of the Erie Canal. The nearest shipping point was only four miles north at Pittsford. Canal packet boats brought immigrants to swell the area population and create a demand for local goods and services. Traffic on the canal began in 1825 and caused Rochester to grow from a hamlet smaller than Mendon to a boom city incorporated in 1834, the year after the Young family left for Kirtland, Ohio.[6]

Brigham Young did not buy real estate in Mendon. He built a house and shop on his father's property. The John Young house and farm in Mendon fronted on the main road from Rochester and Pittsford. The next block south was Tomlinson's Corners on Boughton Hill Road intersection which went east towards Victor. Still standing today is the old John Tomlinson's Inn, noted stagecoach hostelry with an attached dance hall used as a Mormon meeting place. The hall

4. History of Brigham Young in the Church archives, Salt Lake City, Utah.

5. Arthur C. Parker, "Influence of the Erie Canal in the Development of New York State," Rochester Historical Society *Publication Fund Series* VIII (1929), 273.

6. Brigham Young to George Hickox, 1858, Ontario County Historical Society, Canandaigua, N.Y.; Sheldon papers, Valentown Museum, Fishers, N.Y.



The Mendon region, showing the site of Brigham Young's home and mill. Map by Adele L. Johnson from a sketch by J. Sheldon Fisher.

is gone and a Victorian wing has been built on the front. It was the home of his son Nathan, who also left for Kirtland. Next door, Charles and Heber C. Kimball turned out excellent pottery for a waiting market.

From this point looking north is a beautiful sweep of very productive, sandy soil watered by small streams. In the center of this landscape lay the John Young farm. In the middle of the east end, about 550 feet from his father's home, Brigham Young constructed a building, the second floor for his home and the first floor for his shop. His financial arrangement with his father for the expense of constructing the building is not known, nor whether he received any payment when the farm was sold. Since the building was constructed of heavy, handhewn timbers pegged together, he must have had

help. We know that the general custom in this area was for the whole community to turn out for a house- or barn-raising, followed by a party to which everybody brought food and refreshments.

Running through the length of the farm from the east is a small, fast-moving stream that originates in gushing springs forced out of the ground by pressure from the Fairchild Underground River.[7] This water is so pure that it still provides drinking water used at the house and barns. The springs are in a natural basin which Brigham easily dammed up to provide water power for his business.

In 1829, Dr. Milton Sheldon, the storekeeper-physician, sent his future brother-in-law, George Washington Allen, to Brigham Young's home to collect a store debt of $18.50. Years later, after Young had become head of his church and founder of the State of Utah, Allen recalled the visit, and described the home: "A dam had been thrown across this stream and a sufficient water power obtained to run a turning lathe in his shop. I ascended a rickety outside stair case—There was only one room in the house—There was a bed in one corner, a cupboard for dishes in another, a table and a few splint bottom chairs—and a fireplace." Brigham paid the bill on April 1, 1830 with chairs valued at fifty cents each.

Daniel Allen, George's older brother who was born August 16, 1809 and died March 5, 1901, preserved the chairs and a wealth of early Mendon documents. He gave these valuable documents and chairs to A. J. Hill of Fishers, and at the same time authenticated them from his first-hand knowledge.[8] These chairs, in turn, were to be given to me for preservation, but I received only two because others were sold and some were stolen.

I also learned that Brigham Young was a member of the Mendon village Baptist Church, located only one and three-quarters miles from his home. Other church members hired him for work. He built a house for John Woolston which still stands on Main Street, Fishers, next to the Fisher homestead. My great-grandfather, Charles Fisher, founder of Fishers and a pillar of the Mendon church, hired Brigham to

7. See Herman L. Fairchild, *Geologic Story of the Genesee Valley and Western New York* (Rochester, N.Y., 1928).

8. *Rochester Times-Union*, April 9, 1928.

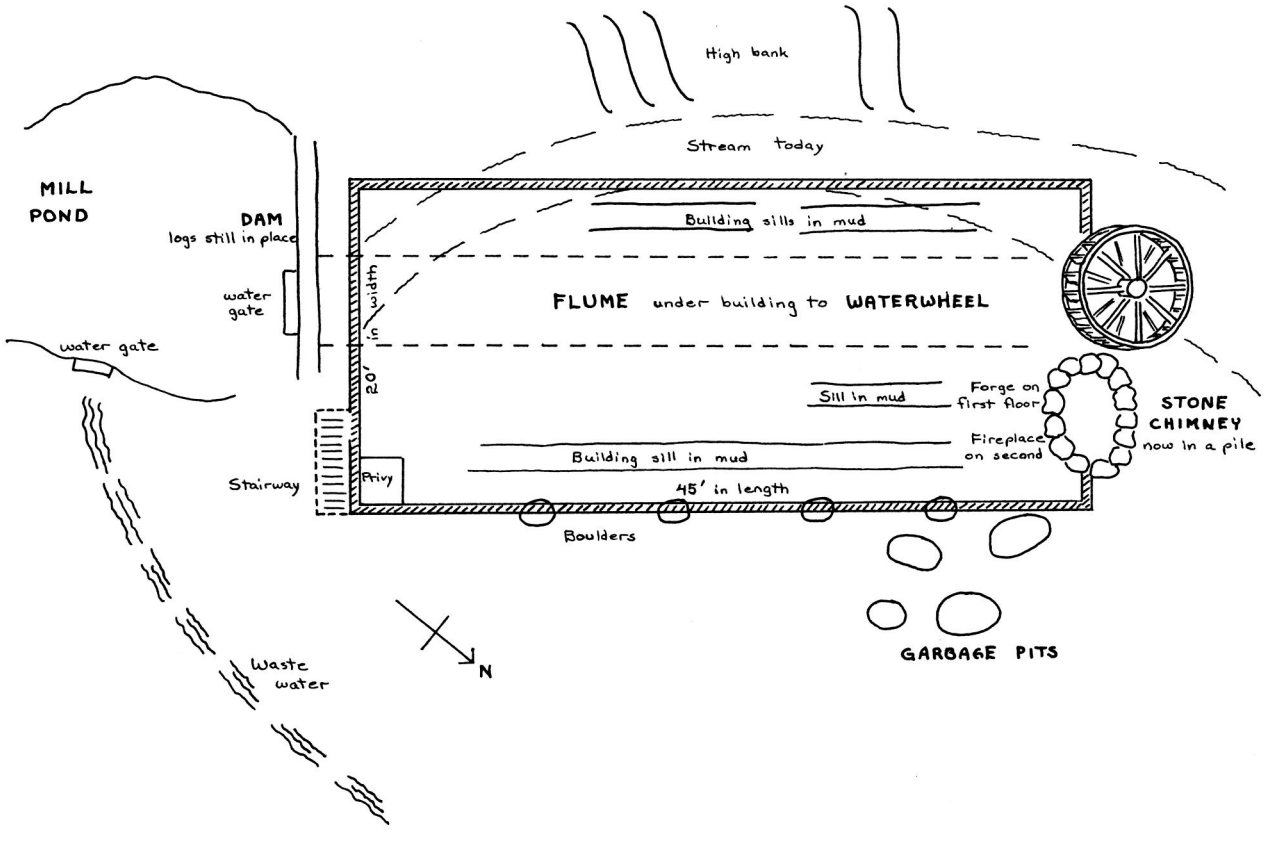
put window panes on the east side of our homestead. He did such work on other area houses. A mile south of John Young's is the Merkel house on which Brigham worked. He also built a house for Jonathan Mack on the Wool House Road in the Town of Canandaigua. Brigham had large, special logs for furniture sawed into usable pieces in Fisher's mill.

All of this, in addition to the Sheldon family papers that had finally been delivered to me, quickened my interest in Brigham Young and contributed to my understanding of his work in Mendon. Having determined the site of Young's house and shop, I obtained exclusive digging rights in 1972 from Mr. and Mrs. Robert Hutchinson who then owned the property, and began an archeological investigation that would lead to additional information about Brigham Young's years in Mendon, and possiby to fresh insights into his life and character during that time when he began his great spiritual adventure.

As a first step, I staked out the site in a grid of ten-foot squares, starting at a spike I drove into a tree at the north-east end of the dam. Exploratory test holes in the area where the building was supposed to have been revealed nothing. But at the edge of the field near the creek bank I found a pothook used to hold kettles on a fireplace crane. Fragments of dishes and pottery were everywhere. A long trench was dug and the sifted soil was thrown back into a pile for a second sifting when it had dried out. By the end of six summers, I had exposed the foundations of the building which measured 45 feet long by 20 feet wide.

In all of my experiences I had never before seen or heard of a building being built in a stream bed as this was. Here, still preserved, were the foundation timbers shaped by a broad axe and smoothed off by an adz. The sills of the building on the field side had rested on large boulders and were rotted away because they were not covered by mud or water.

The upstream end of the building was about four feet from the dam which still reveals the bottom logs and the heavy supporting boulders. A headgate controlled the amount of water that flowed down a plank flume under the building to a three-foot-wide waterwheel housed inside near the down-stream end of the building. The waterwheel spun over a wide



Plan of the Young mill and dwelling as determined by J. Sheldon Fisher's investigation. Drawn by Adele L. Johnson from a sketch by Fisher.

board, which prevented the water from gouging out the gravel under the waterwheel and losing water pressure. A four-foot head of water operated the undershot waterwheel.

The waterwheel was mounted on a heavy pegged frame of hewn oak timbers, parts of which were well preserved in the mud. This frame was mortised and tenoned into the house foundation timbers, which were still visible. It would appear that because of its size, the water wheel could have come up through the floor into the first-floor shop. Shafts, pulleys and belts operated the saws, grindstone and two lathes, one for metal work and the other for wood turning. There were trap doors in several places in the shop floor where the wood-working debris was swept into the water. Much of the debris was not swept away and lodged in the depressions in the creek bed.

Near the northwest corner of the building was a stone fireplace serving the first-floor shop and the second-floor dwelling. A part of the first-floor fireplace was a forge for blacksmith-type work. The fireplace interiors were built of brick evidently made by Brigham Young on the spot since a pile of red clay and waste fragments of brick were found there. His initials were cut into some bricks when the clay was wet before the bricks were baked.

There seems to have been a wide door to the main floor shop placed approximately in the center of the side of the building that faced the field. The creek bank is steep on the opposite side of the building. Broken window panes at several places along the foundations suggested the location of windows. The outside stairway to the second-floor dwelling entered from the field side of the building between the dam and the northeast corner. At that corner of the building was the privy, which was usable from both floors. The roof of the building was covered with well-made, smooth cedar shingles and the sides were covered with cedar clapboards, parts of both being preserved. Moldings and shaped woods strongly suggest that there was a cupola on the building. A good portion of the finial has been preserved. Early craft shops often had louvered cupolas and fanlights to ventilate the attics and were made with an artistic touch. I am sure that Brigham's building had such a cupola. The moldings for a fireplace mantel were also found partially preserved. The William Henry Seward house in Auburn has a fireplace

mantel built by Brigham Young, and I own a fireplace mantel believed to have been made by Young. It may be assumed that he crafted the mantel in his shop.

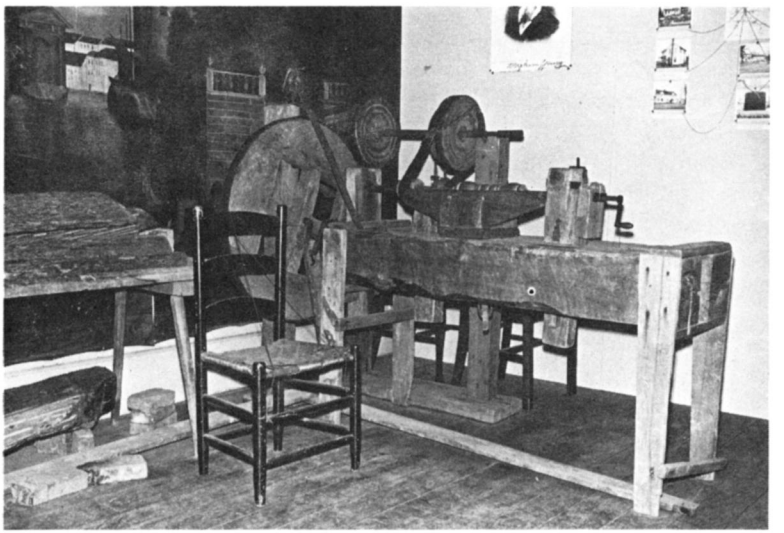
Despite Brigham's statements about his church activities during the Mendon years, I am quite convinced that he spent more time in his shop than he remembered. With an operation of this size there was a great deal to do—orders to fill, errands to run, and general maintenance work to be done. Brigham may have done it himself, or perhaps he had a young, inexperienced boy or apprentice to help him with the rough furniture work.

The depression in the ground indicates the course of the waste water raceway. A watergate allowed the water to make a half-circle loop forty feet from the building to re-enter the creek bed beyond the end of the building from the millpond. Before any more archeological work can be done, this raceway will have to be re-opened to remove the water from the excavation. I spent too much time bailing out the water by pail from the earth coffer dams.

Nothing has ever been mentioned in Brigham's writings about his work in metal. I found evidence that he had a forge near the first-floor fireplace. Quantities of good hardwood charcoal were there, and a broken cast iron crucible with slag in it. More slag was scattered about. Two high-carbon steel cutting tools for lathe work were discarded because the points were burned. Such tools must have been used in a precision lathe for metal work and in cutting a number of wooden threads which I found. Among the papers in my possession is a receipt for a metal screw and tap used in making threads, made by Brigham for my great-grandfather who made stagecoaches.

I have not been able to determine what happened to the precision lathe. I did trace the regular woodworking lathe to the shop of the man who bought the machines and tools from the Young shop. When Rufus Richardson bought the John Young farm on the 14th of May, 1833, he sold the shop furnishings to Rufus Humphrey, an inventor who lived on the Victor-Holcomb Road.[9] With the intent of rebuilding the Young mill either on the original site or next to my museum, I purchased everything that was left in the Humphrey shop,

9. Book of Deeds, Liber 28, p. 23, Monroe County Court House.



One of Brigham Young's chairs and his turning lathe, which were sold to Rufus Humphry in 1834. Photo courtesy of J. Sheldon Fisher.

including the turning lathe, the pulleys and wooden shafting, and other equipment.

I have gathered old lumber from ancient buildings such as Charles and Heber C. Kimball's pottery shop. This includes Christian doors, wide floorboards, and fireplace mantels. Brigham's structure was dismantled and rebuilt into a dwelling on Malone Road near Roswell Murray's house. Roswell married Brigham's sister, Fanny Young. By a previous marriage he was the father of Vilate Murray, who married Heber C. Kimball.

Many of the tools were not sold. Like many shops where litter accumulates on jobs, the sweepings take out things that are not intended to be discarded. However, it was very exciting and a great deal of fun to trowel through the layers of well-preserved lathe chips and rotted sawdust turned to muck. Mixed in were several wood and lathe chisels and iron chisels for cutting metal. In this complex mess I found a couple of jackknives, different sized drills, reamers, screwdrivers, several hammers, a broadaxe, punches, awls, a trowel,

files, whetstones, and a queer-looking tool for making deep wood cuts which was somehow mounted on a lathe. A fascinating marking stamp for making an impression on wood bears the letters "H W," presumably from the Works family. Brigham's furniture stamp was not found.

Brigham's ingenuity for making-do with available materials was quite impressive. Antlers of the elk, moose, deer and ram were worked for specific uses, such as bushings for spindles or shafts used on small machines. He relied a great deal on the use of leather—as cotter keys, washers, bushings for his manufacture of spinning wheels, palm guards, hinges, and general repairs. He discarded quantities of leather scraps. We are told that in later years, when the Tabernacle was built in Salt Lake City, he directed the use of leather for binding the timbers together.

A forge hammer was found near the fireplace with a number of horse and oxen shoes, suggesting that he shod his own beasts of burden. A fireplace shovel and tongs turned up.

In the collection of hardware were door latches, a lock and key, iron hinges for doors and blanket chests. There were all sizes of handwrought nails, ranging from small, inch-long brads to 15-inch spikes. An interesting find was a flint and steel, called a Strike-o-light, used before the invention of sulphur matches. A real pleasure was the finding of an ancient type of garden hoe, complete with its handle, beautifully preserved by the mud.

It is amazing how careful excavation can reveal very small artifacts. A winding of a linen thread used as a packing in the inside of a screw bottle cap preserved it perfectly. This was due to the copper oxide. I saved about two quarts of a concentration of a strange-looking substance. Studying it under a strong magnifying glass suggested that it was tamarack needles. I located a live tree of the species, and sure enough the needles matched exactly. Balsam and tamarack needles were once used to stuff pillows to create a pleasant scent. I was puzzled by another mystery substance of a dark reddish color which was concentrated in the mud. After numerous comparison studies, I found that it was sawdust from wild cherry wood. Brigham also made furniture out of cherry wood. I made another study which established that a flat white substance was gypsum plaster used on the walls of the

living quarters. The building was obviously constructed with care and finely finished.

Besides the pieces of hand-blown window panes, I found good examples of hand-blown glassware, some clear, some colored, and some with embossed design. The remainder of a deep opalescent plate and an early goblet are still somewhere in the creek mud.

Of special delight to my wife was the wide variety of broken dishes with bright designs which she enjoyed matching and gluing together. Many of the dishes were plain white ware; other patterns included Willow Ware, Flow Blue, Copper Lustre, and many patterns of old English Staffordshire china. Strangely, there was only one matching cup and saucer among the many different patterns. It is interesting to note that in June 1829, Dr. Milton Sheldon recorded the sale to Brigham of one set of cups and saucers. I am quite sure that some of these were among the sixty different broken dishes that I found. George W. Allen mentioned seeing in that year a china cabinet in the Young's living room. Some of the dish fragments found show pig teeth marks. When dishes were broken, they were thrown into the garbage pit and the roaming pigs crunched them. In pioneer days, pigs were allowed to roam the woods for part of their food supply and to kill off the rattlesnakes, which they enjoyed eating.

Have you ever used any of the old two-tined table forks? If not it is just as well, for it is easy to spear your lips and draw blood. The Young family used these two-tined steel forks, for I found several of them. I also found silverplated tablespoons and knives. I am still excited about a pewter spoon handle of a very patriotic nature with an embossed eagle design. Without success I searched for the missing bowl, in order to make the set complete. Out of the privy remains I found a pewter baby spoon with a three-cornered rosewood handle. This probably belonged to the baby girl, Vilate. Cereal dishes for Elizabeth and Vilate were found in the creek mud.

The site produced an amazing variety of personal effects. Discarded leather shoes belonging to the girls came out of the mud in good shape except that the threads had rotted away. Shoes and slippers belonging to Miriam and Brigham survived in recognizable form, but needed some resewing.

Objects found at the site of the Young mill. Above: a lock and key for a blanket chest made by Young, a pewter baby spoon, and a deer-antler holder for a metal awl. Opposite: jackknives, a fireplace pot holder, door latches, and a wood chisel. Photos courtesy of J. Sheldon Fisher.

Sewing thimbles of brass also appeared, and I troweled several early American coins out the waterwheel pit. Remains of a vanity compact with a broken mirror was another interesting find, as was one small blue bead. The mud also held many buttons of brass, pewter, bone, zinc, and silver plate, and one brass button covered with a gray, handwoven fabric well preserved by copper oxide. A few fragments of handmade toys and some marbles also appeared. Under a board I found a crushed Easter egg with a painted design. When I tried to save it as found, the water mixed up with the shell, but by blowing a whole new egg I was able to record the zebra-like pattern.

While gardening, Brigham Young apparently came upon Indian relics, for in his garbage pit was an arrowpoint of the 3,000-year-old Laurentian culture, and a 5,000-year-old beveled stone adz of the Lamoka culture.[10] In the same pit I found a wisdom tooth from a female's upper left jaw.[11]

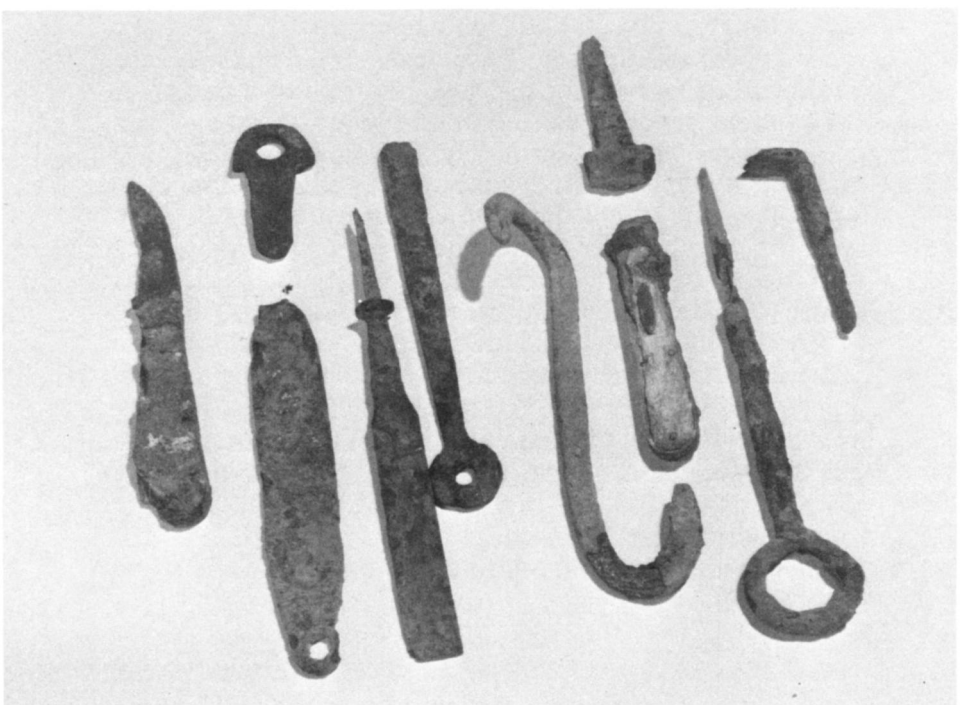
10. William A. Ritchie, *The Pre-Iroquoian Occupations of New York State* (Rochester, N.Y., 1944), pp. 235–53, 292–303.

11. The wisdom tooth was examined by three dentists.

Where the soapy dishwater seems to have been thrown was a gold wedding band with a raised four-leaf clover design, but with no engraved initials or other identification.

I made a careful study of the food scrap remains in order to determine the family diet. The remains included pits of the cherry, peach, apricot, and wild plum; seeds of the apple, pumpkin, melon, squash, and charred corn; chestnuts, butternuts, hickory nuts, pig nuts, black walnuts, and beechnuts. Roast beef and beef steak bones were also plentiful in the garbage pits, as well as pork bones, lamb and mutton, passenger pigeon, various game birds, chicken, duck, and geese bones. Brigham's family also ate turtle, fish, and fresh-water clams. The garbage even included shells from salt-water clams.

More than fifty-five years ago the Robert Hutchinson family, which had acquired the John Young house, cleaned out the attic and sold Brigham Young items to an antique dealer. I, in turn, bought some of the things, including three



chairs and a trunk. At the corner of the Quaker Meeting House and Semmel Roads in Mendon, lived Ira Bond who is buried in the Kirtland, Ohio, Temple cemetery. He purchased furniture from Brigham Young, and this was stored in the attic when he went to Ohio. I purchased out of this attic a pine end table. When I was sorting the sawed-off chair and table legs from Brigham's shop site, I discovered that one piece matched perfectly on the front leg of my table. From the discarded scrap pieces I could identify blanket chests of three types. One chest made for Henry Claflin had been stamped in wood, "Made by B. Young, Mendon." He made one-drawer stands in cherry, maple, and white pine. I found the legs for a cricket stool and parts of a child's doll crib. I made a copy in pine wood of this crib.

Brigham made chests of drawers and tables as well as handy household equipment similar to that of the Shakers. One item was a delicately turned hat and coat rack. His spinning wheels were of excellent quality. I found his finished and unfinished spinning wheel parts, but could not remove the thin, ash wood rims for his wool wheels from the mud. I found exquisitely made, curved spindles for a Windsor-type chair which could have been for a straight chair or a rocker. The spindles could have been used between two slats so that the graceful curve would fit a person's back. I am very excited about this find for I have never seen a chair like it. I also found spool bars for the head and foot of a bed.

For three generations, the John Young farm has been owned by the Hutchinson family. The most recent owners, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Hutchinson, being advanced in years, were pressured to sell the property for a housing development. I persuaded them to hold off until I could find a buyer who would preserve the house and property for its historical value. This I did, and the title was transferred in January 1979 to Mr. Lynn Skabelund and his brother, Dr. R. E. Skabelund of Logan, Utah. They agreed to have the archeological work done with my suggestions, and to rebuild Brigham's structure as a showplace. The fine barn was to be made into a museum, and the barn basement was to be turned into a cabinet shop to make reproductions of Brigham Young's furniture, though to date nothing has been done.

Another archeological study that I hope to do is of the

nearby pottery shop site of Mormon pioneer Heber C. Kimball, a professional potter. Heber and Brigham's friendship started here with their similar interests. Within the collection of pottery from Brigham's site are examples of Kimball's work. Mixed in are fragments of pottery made by the noted Alvin Wilcox of West Bloomfield, an early employer of Heber Chase Kimball. In my collection is a very large pottery vessel by Heber, finer and more artistic than anything known to have been made by Wilcox.[12]

When Miriam Works Young was in her last stages of tuberculosis, Mr. and Mrs. Kimball took her into their home and nursed her until her death on September 8, 1832. They then brought up Elizabeth and Vilate Young. When Heber gave up his trade for missionary preaching, one of his famous sermons was based on the theme, "Clay in the Hands of the Potter." Heber C. Kimball was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly called Mormons, by Elder Alpheus Gifford on April 15, 1832, in Brigham Young's millpond. The day before, Brigham had been baptized by Eleazer Miller. More than sixty-four area people were baptized there, and then the pond and mill were never used again, except as a place to fish. Thus ended the work of an important Mendon craftsman.

12. Pottery collections of the Valentown Museum.